

On Afghanistan and Presidential Certainty

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Shortly before leaving office President Lyndon Johnson remarked “I think (my grandchildren) will be proud of two things. What I did for the Negro and seeing it through in Vietnam for all of Asia. The Negro cost me 15 points in the polls and Vietnam cost me 20.” Johnson’s support for the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act were very controversial at the time, but were essential in helping America become a real democracy and cemented Johnson’s position as one of our greatest presidents on domestic issues. The war in Vietnam, however, destroyed lives, was very costly, almost tore the country apart and makes it impossible to view Johnson as a great president. What is perhaps most striking about this comment is that it suggests that to Johnson there was a moral equivalency to civil rights and the war in Vietnam. History has proven him wrong on this, but, in this statement, Johnson seemed to say that although his presidency had been destroyed, it had been destroyed by things in which he believed.

The war in Afghanistan threatens to do to President Obama what Vietnam did to Johnson. We are not there yet as public concern over Afghanistan is not yet close to what it was over Vietnam by the late 1960s. Nonetheless, Afghanistan may become the major issue which dominates Obama’s presidency, overshadows any domestic accomplishments and for which Obama will be remembered. This is particularly true given that Obama’s domestic legislative accomplishments are far less impressive than those of LBJ.

Afghanistan is a confoundingly difficult dilemma for the president. Continuing the course in Afghanistan means getting deeper and deeper into a war in which the end is only very remotely in sight as casualties and costs inevitably increase. Moreover, while the issues at stake in Afghanistan have direct bearing on our national security, it is far from apparent that the war as it stands now is doing anything to make us safer. Withdrawing from Afghanistan will also be difficult as it will not only raise a new set of security issues and require retooling a range of national security strategies, but will also make Obama vulnerable to charges of weakness, timidity and probably anti-Americanism from the far right.

Watching the Obama administration from the outside it is hard not to conclude that the President’s support for the war in Afghanistan is not at least somewhat political in nature. During his campaign Obama called for refocusing U.S. efforts towards Afghanistan, but this was generally presented as a way to frame Obama’s opposition to the Iraq war and to make the candidate, who was lacking in traditional foreign policy experience, seem less dovish. As president, it has seemed like similar motivations have been part of Obama’s Afghanistan policy. The war has, if nothing else, helped Obama successfully position himself as a centrist.

For Obama, the political benefits of the war, however, are eroding and will soon collapse entirely, perhaps taking Obama's presidency along as well. Clearly, supporting the war for political reasons, while understandable in some respects, will be not only disastrous for the president, but are an example of politics at their most cynical and cruel. Johnson destroyed his presidency for something in which he genuinely, although wrong-headedly believed. Obama may destroy his presidency over a misguided sense of what is politically necessary.

There is another possibility which deserves consideration as well. Perhaps Obama is being truthful when he defends expanding the war as being, in his view, essential for U.S. national security and the best approach in Afghanistan. This would be a far more principled, and perhaps even more likely, motivation, but it would still be wrong. If this is the case, at least Obama, like LBJ will be able to reflect on his presidency and know that he did what he thought was right regardless of the political consequences. Obama would be better served, however, to take a different lesson from Johnson's words, as well as a more recent president's certainty regarding a war in Iraq, that inflexibility and certainty are no substitutes for listening to the voters, understanding changing circumstances and that sometimes doing the right thing means changing one's mind and one's policies. True presidential wisdom lies in knowing when to change course and when to remain steadfast. Obama still has some time to demonstrate that he possesses this kind of wisdom.